
Seek and You Will Find

Matthew 2:1-12

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on January 1, 2017,
by the Rev. Megan M. Pardue

“Where is the child who has been born King of the Jews?” the magi ask. “Where is the child revealed? You know the story, you know it well, with all of its wonder and mystery. The magi have paying attention to the stars and then one star rose out of sync with the others. Somehow they knew that this was the child’s star, the one that meant the king of the Jews had been born. They just couldn’t contain themselves, they had to find him to give him honor, to pledge their allegiance to this king, to give him gifts. They didn’t even know his name. But to this group, the distance didn’t matter. All the way to Jerusalem they traveled, asking, “Where is the child who has been born King of the Jews?” Once they arrive in Jerusalem, they go straight to King Herod, the King of the Jews to ask, “Where is King of the Jews?” Seriously, you ask King Herod for directions to find the King of the Jews? And we call these guys, “wise men?” They should’ve known better!

In an instant, Herod saw his life flash before his eyes. This foretold Messiah, this shepherd of the people—it was always an option buried deep in his subconscious—but surely not in his lifetime. He saw in that moment his crown taken forcefully from his head, some undeserving kid from a family know ones heard of, sitting, on his throne! All it took was one question—“Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” Look what the right question can expose.

So, he calls upon his research experts, who can give the magi more accurate directions. You’re not far off—the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem. Go and look for him there. And then, Herod, the conniving politician, transforms his demeanor from fear to eager hopefulness. “Let me know where you find him, so I too can go and give him honor.”

Once again, the magi depart, paying attention to the star that had guided them along the way. When the star stopped over the place where the child was, they were overwhelmed with joy and went into the house.

While most nativity scenes include the magi gathered right there by the manger with the donkey and shepherds, Jesus was likely older, even a toddler, by the time the magi made it to meet him. Matthew alludes to this age range in the next few verses, saying that Herod acted against all the boys two years and under, based on the timeline the magi told him. Now, I have no trouble imagining the star rising and moving through the sky like an ancient GPS. But, as the mother of a two-year-old, I find this encounter, with the magi and toddler Jesus, much harder to envision. The magi knock at the door, walk into this mostly empty living room. Jesus, he's on the far side of the room, clinging to Mary's leg. The magi are so joyful and humbled, they've traveled so far, they've gone to such great lengths to get here! Joseph's hardly got the door closed before they are on the ground, lying prostrate, showing honor to Christ, worshipping this toddler. Epiphany!

Can you see Jesus, looking up nervously at Mary—"Mommy, what are they doing?" As if this wasn't confusing, then, they bust out the presents. But they didn't bring him play-doh or a toy sailboat. This whole time, they knew they were searching for a child, but still, they brought gold, frankincense and myrrh? Wise men? Really? I hear Mary stumbling through her words, sounding grateful and cautious, that tone parents get when trying to explain something we can't really articulate to a child, while also being polite to guests—"Well, Jesus, these gifts are very special." Say, "Thank you" to the magi. "Why can't you play with your presents? They're so special. You can look, just don't touch."

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany. If you, like me, are newer to observing the Christian calendar, epiphany, really is that same word, as in, "I heard myself say that and had an epiphany—I am my mother." Epiphany—a realization, a revelation, a moment of insight, when what was previously muddy or confusing, becomes crystal clear.

Today is also January 1st, the first day of the New Year. And while those of us following the Christian calendar said, "Happy New Year" six weeks ago, on the first Sunday of advent, we still have plenty of reminders that the rest of our culture operates on this other calendar. Vitamins and dental floss are on sale at Target. Co-workers will ask you about your New Year's resolutions tomorrow. And for the next few weeks, I'll have to wait in line to get on the exercise bike at the Y.

On this Epiphany Sunday and the beginning of another calendar year, you and I receive a

lot of invitations to seek—seek to be better, to improve ourselves, to finally make that change. Listen to the invitations offered on the New York Times non-fiction best-seller’s list. You can embrace *The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up*. You can finally *Settle for More*. Or you can, *Jump: Taking That Leap of Faith to Achieve Your Life of Abundance*.

While some of us are considering making self-improvements this year, through our resolutions or goals, others aren’t sure how they’re going to make it through 2017. Some wonder, “How will I make rent, now that my seasonal employment has ended?” “What will I do if my insurance doesn’t cover this treatment?” “How will I keep going, now that he’s gone?” For others, this may be a season where seeking new habits and self-discipline are essential for survival. People experience captivity—to work, to food, to material possessions, to addiction—and Christ is in the business of setting people free. This may require getting help. It may mean looking inward for a time, paying attention to you, and that’s ok. Still, the seekers in our story, the magi, they just aren’t seeking some kind of self-improvement or to reach previously unattained goals. Herod is the only self-motivated character, concerned with ensuring he stays the best version of himself—the one with all the power. The magi are seeking Christ for an end outside of themselves—to see Christ revealed and to give him honor.

On this Epiphany Sunday and the beginning of another calendar year, the magi extend to us a different invitation. Seek epiphanies. Seek the revealed Christ. It’s a whole lot more interesting to seek something outside of ourselves. For the magi, seeking looks like following a star to find the child. But really, what they’re up to is paying attention and showing up. “For we observed his star...”—they observed, they paid attention. And then, the magi followed the star, they came to see him. They showed up.

Where is the child who has been born King of Jews? Where is Christ revealed? Where is Christ being revealed? While I struggle to wrap my mind around this final scene—magi from the east bowing down to toddler Jesus while puzzled Jesus stands there speechless. But Christ revealed in a two-year-old? Now that, I know to be possible.

When I was first introduced to Deb and Ian, they were living here, on Central campus, Deb a junior at the time, and Ian, just three months old. That’s right—a baby living right up the road, in an apartment, in a fraternity, on central campus. Deb told me I could share their story

with you today. I met Deb and Ian on one of the pediatric units at Duke hospital. Ian, who was born with a rare congenital heart defect, was preparing for his second open-heart surgery. I walked into Ian's room, and saw this small baby in the crib connected to monitors. On the table next to the bed were piles of homework, textbooks and empty coffee cups. I introduced myself, Deb and I chatted for a bit, Deb catching me up on what was happening. She was taking a full load of classes at Duke, single parenting, and spending every hour she wasn't in class up here with Ian at the hospital. I asked for her permission to share her situation with Refuge, the congregation I pastor, and I told her I'd come back again in a couple of days to visit again. I had no idea when I left the hospital that day the multitude of epiphanies I'd witness in Ian, in his remarkably determined and faithful mother, and the community that came around them. I went to church the next Sunday and shared that I'd met a Duke student and her sick kid and that they needed some folks to walk alongside them. Over the weeks that followed, I watched Deb show up and pay attention to her child, day after day after day, despite all of the other things that tried to claim her attention. I saw strangers from Refuge show up—bringing her lunch or her favorite Starbucks drink, people who kept her company for 20 minutes here or there. When Ian was out of the hospital and recovered, Deb and Ian started attending Refuge regularly. And we fell in love with this sweet little boy and his sarcastic, intelligent mom. After Ian's third heart surgery, I remember being in the ICU with Deb on a terrible day. Ian, now 2, wailed in pain as the medication keeping him comfortable wore off. Through my own watery eyes, I watched as Deb, patiently and calmly, played peek-a-boo with Ian, making every effort to distract him. Somehow—I can't explain it—in Ian's tears and pain, he didn't endure alone. Christ revealed in suffering. Epiphany.

On the day of his baptism, Ian couldn't stay out of the water. First, he was jumping and wading in the 6-inch deep puddles near where we gathered for Easter service, pants completely wet. Then, as the font was being filled, he was already splashing in it, getting his hands and shirt soaked, before the water was even poured over his head. We laughed together at his eagerness to get in the water. Christ revealed in sacrament, Christ revealed in joy. Epiphany. This past Father's Day, during the announcements at Refuge, Deb spoke up, directly, and concisely, as is her style. "With Ian's condition, he has a 50% chance of living past the age of 10. I've wanted him to know what it's like to have a father. I know now, that if he dies, he'll know what it's like to have a dad, because he's had fathers with all of you." Christ revealed in community. Epiphany.

Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? If we miss the revealed Christ, if we seek and we don't find, maybe we're just paying attention to the wrong people and showing up in the wrong places.

Where do we even begin to seek? This is where the whole of the nativity's cast of characters and where it takes place gives us solid starting point. Who are the first two to know about the coming Messiah, to proclaim that he will be born? Not King Herod or Caesar, not a president, professor, provost or priest, but Mary—a pregnant, unmarried, junior in high school and her cousin, pregnant Elizabeth, written off by her community as past her prime.

With whom do the angels share the good news? They don't announce it to social media or the newspapers, but to a group of unplugged, unconnected migrant farming shepherds, who roam from place to place without a roof over their heads. Jesus isn't born in the center of the action, in the capital, with its money, education, and progress, but in the backwoods little town of Bethlehem, with its one motel and single traffic light. When Jerusalem finally hears news of Jesus' birth, two years after the fact, it's the foreigners with accents and strange clothes that clue them in. Jerusalem's own academics and legal experts—they hadn't been paying attention.

There's also the possibility that we'll miss seeing Christ, because we're expecting to have epiphanies only here, in Sunday worship, so we don't show up or pay attention during other hours of our week. Of course, Christ is revealed here through songs of praise, through word and table, and the sharing of peace. But these practices shape us to see Christ revealed outside of these walls—when the stories of Scripture come alive and we find ourselves in them or when we're sharing a meal with a group of people that doesn't make sense and realize we're doing the same thing we do when we come to the table in worship. As one pastor puts it, "This. Here. This is merely the dress rehearsal. A dress rehearsal for what happens out there—in real life."¹ You can't see the stars from in here. And the magi didn't meet Jesus in the temple, but in the house where he was staying.

¹ Adapted from Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*.

You and I—we can declutter our houses, eat better, and establish healthy habits this year. But the invitation from the magi—it's an invitation to seek something different, something else besides self-improvement or goal achievement—Seek Christ, revealed in the most ordinary moments, with often forgotten people, in all the wrong places. Epiphany.